

Hayley Tsukayama and Kevin Diaz, *Star Tribune*

WASHINGTON - Rep. Keith Ellison was called "Sambo." Rep. Betty McCollum received a used condom. Both got threatening letters, as did a number of other Minnesota lawmakers who voted for the Democrats' health care bill.

Thursday's incidents in the Twin Cities appeared to be part of a nationwide rash of threats and harassment against members of Congress in the aftermath of the bitter national struggle over overhauling health care.

As threats spread, political rhetoric over the historic legislation remained intense as President Obama dared his Republican critics to follow through on their vows to campaign this fall on a platform to repeal the legislation. Speaking in Iowa, where he first laid out detailed plans as a candidate to overhaul health care, Obama said: "If these congressmen in Washington want to come here to Iowa and tell small-business owners that they plan to take away their tax credits and essentially raise their taxes, be my guest."

Meanwhile, some Republicans accused Democrats of using the reports of threats for political gain. "To use such threats as political weapons is reprehensible," said Rep. Eric Cantor of Virginia, the Republican whip, who said a shot was fired through a window of his campaign office in Richmond, Va., this week, but that he had chosen not to publicize the incident. "By ratcheting up the rhetoric, some will only inflame these situations to dangerous levels."

Leaders in both parties are condemning the vandalism and threats, but disagree on why it's happening. Democrats and a few Republicans reported at least 10 incidents of harassment amid the tensions following passage of the health care bill, which Obama signed Tuesday.

Lawmakers in other states have had windows in their offices broken, one reported a shot fired and a gas line was cut at the home of a congressman's brother in Virginia. McCollum told authorities she received two threatening letters at her St. Paul district office, one attached to a used condom and laced with obscenities. One letter, a page-long typewritten screed threatening to "intimidate you and your family," was copied to Sens. Amy Klobuchar and Al Franken, and to Ellison, all Democrats. Ellison said he also received several offensive e-mails and calls, including a voice mail from a man in south Minneapolis who said "Timothy McVeigh said dead government workers are good government workers. Goodbye, Sambo."

'Americans are upset'

Democrats blamed Republicans and their Tea Party allies for overheated rhetoric that has fanned the flames of fanaticism nationwide. "Convincing their base that the health care reform would lead to 'Armageddon,' conservative leaders in Congress, talk radio and on Fox News have deliberately whipped conservative extremists into a frenzy," said Eric Burns, of the left-leaning media watchdog group Media Matters.

Minnesota Republican Rep. Michele Bachmann, a Tea Party icon, also condemned the threats, even as she said she understands people's frustrations.

"Americans are upset for being ignored by Congress, but this frustration should be channeled into repealing this monstrosity of a bill," she said. "I encourage everyone to call their congressman, get involved in local elections and make your voice heard clearly this November."

McCollum, the first in the Minnesota delegation to discover the hate mail, said she reported it to St. Paul police, as well as to Capitol Police and postal authorities. At least one other threatening message was received through her website.

"This has gone beyond freedom of speech," McCollum said. "This has gone to direct intimidation with intent to harm, and that is a criminal action."

One letter received by McCollum and several other Minnesota Democrats contained a slew of obscenities and vowed to take violent action, if necessary, to stop the "this 'Big Government' takeover."

'It's worse'

Ellison, who got a copy of the letter, said that as a black Muslim, he's used to hate mail. "We get stuff like this every day," he said. "I have boxes of it. But usually it's on my religion. The last few days it's been about the health care stuff, and it's worse."

Ellison said he also has received several offensive e-mails and phone messages, including from the Minneapolis man who left his name and phone number. He also recounted an expletive-laced letter that he received before the vote last week, calling him a "communist" and threatening to "destroy" him if he voted for the bill. He said that while he doesn't feel personally intimidated, he normally reports the incidents to police "so they can link the dots together."

McCollum's district director, Josh Straka, said that the postmark on the letters she received was from St. Paul and mailed Wednesday. "They were obscene," Straka said. He added these were the only letters the office had received that "have risen to that level."

Klobuchar's office confirmed it received one of the letters. Franken's spokeswoman, Jess McIntosh, said she couldn't immediately confirm or deny that they had received any threats, given the volume of mail the office receives.

Other Minnesota members of Congress reported high volumes of calls and letters over health care, including Democrat Jim Oberstar, an abortion foe who was at the center of a debate over abortion language in the final bill.

No other Minnesota congressional members reported threats as of Thursday evening. "Nothing out of the ordinary," said Oberstar spokesman John Schadt. "Just a few comments that would embarrass the mothers and aunts of the callers or e-mailers, and those tend to come from outside of the district."

The Washington Post and Associated Press contributed to this report.